

# THE KEY PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

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When most people think of market research methods, they inevitably think of questionnaires. Questionnaires are certainly an important means by which we capture responses from people and they can be administered face to face, over the telephone or they can be self-completion.

The primary purpose of a questionnaire is to help extract data from respondents. It serves as a standard guide for the interviewers who each need to ask the questions in exactly the same way. Without this standard, questions would be asked in a haphazard way at the discretion of the individual. Questionnaires are also an important part in the data collection methodology. They are the medium on to which responses are recorded to facilitate data analysis.

There are seven steps in the design of a questionnaire:

## **Step 1 – Decide what information is required**

The starting point is for the researcher to refer to the proposal and brief and make a listing of all the objectives and what information is required in order that they are achieved.

## **Step 2 – Make a rough listing of the questions**

A list is now made of all the questions that could go into the questionnaire. The aim at this stage is to be as comprehensive as possible in the listing and not to worry about the phrasing of the questions. That comes next.

## **Step 3 – Refine the question phrasing**

The questions must now be developed close to the point where they make sense and will generate the right answers. Tips on how to write good questions are provided later in this chapter.

## **Step 4 – Develop the response format**

Every question needs a response. This could be a pre-coded list of answers or it could be open ended to collect verbatim comments. Consideration of the responses is just as important as getting the questions right. In fact, considering the answers will help get the questions right.

## **Step 5 – Put the questions into an appropriate sequence**

The ordering of the questions is important as it brings logic and flow to the interview. Normally the respondent is eased into the task with relatively straightforward questions while the more difficult or sensitive ones are left until they are warmed up. Questions on brand awareness are asked first unprompted and then they are prompted.

### **Step 6 – Finalise the layout of the questionnaire**

The questionnaire now needs to be fully formatted with clear instructions to the interviewer, including a powerful introduction, routings and probes. There needs to be enough space to write in answers and the responses codes need to be well separated from each other so there is no danger of circling the wrong one.

### **Step 7 – Pretest and revise**

The final step is to test the questionnaire. It usually isn't necessary to carry out more than 10 to 20 interviews in a pilot because the aim is to make sure that it works, and not to obtain pilot results. In theory the questionnaire should be piloted using the interviewing method that will be used in the field (over the phone if telephone interviews are to be used; self completed if it will be a self completion questionnaire). Time and money can preclude a proper pilot so at the very least it should be tested on one or two colleagues for sense, flow and clarity of instructions. The whole purpose of the test is to find out if changes are needed so that final revisions can be made. When carrying out the pilot it is best to run through the questionnaire with the guinea pig respondent and then go back over the questions and ask for each one, "what was going through your mind when you were asked this question?".

Questionnaire design is one of the hardest and yet one of the most important parts of the market research process. Given the same objectives, two researchers would probably never design the same questionnaire.

If questionnaires fail it is usually because they are dashed off with insufficient thought. Questions may be missed out; they could be badly constructed, too long, or too complicated and sometimes unintelligible. Good questionnaires are iterations which begin as a rough draft and, through constant refinement, are converted to precise and formatted documents.

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